Make an Art Machine

Build an imaginary machine out of found objects. Let the absurd take over as you find the solution to a problem in the deepest pocket of your mind.

One of Jeff London's few documented art exercises asked students to build a machine out of found objects. Sometimes he called it an *Action & Reaction Machine*, other times a *Machine to Free Yourself*, or an *Art Making Machine*.

Jeff wrote as he spoke … with gaps … and speedy bits—it was confusing yet got you enthusiastic. His concepts were up for interpretation, and he asked his students to interpret their own inner worlds for the outer world to see.

Here's a distillation of Jeff's machine-building exercises, which is more about letting yourself be inspired than it is about achieving a certain aesthetic. "There is no good or bad in art," Jeff would say, "we don't know what good is without bad … so really bad is a better good … because it makes what's good, good." So, don't worry about how it looks; don't censor yourself. Be carried away by your imagination.

Do more art exercises
@causticmerriment

Set the scene

You will be making a machine out of found objects. The machine must look like it does something. This is a "dream machine" or "art production unit" or "alarm clock for extreme sleepyheads."

It's about creativity and imagination, so provocations are better than examples, but if you want to see some examples, look at the art of Alexander Calder, Jean Tinguely, Rube Goldburg, Sarah Sze, and Theaster Gates.

You can build it in an hour or over a few days, so you have time to find that last perfect piece to complete your machine.

Materials needed

You'll need a few big boxes of random found objects: plastic bits, broken tools, old toys, nuts and bolts, exploded appliances, stuff from the kitchen drawer. A group trip to the dump is always fun. Besides junk, you'll need: glue guns, duct tape, and basic workshop tools.

Making it

1. **What's your problem?** Most machines solve a problem. What problem really bothers you? You might have a simple problem, like how to sharpen a pencil, or a complex problem, such as how to separate fact from fiction. You can solve a personal issue like finding matching socks, or a societal one like peace on earth. Whatever your problem, it should excite you and offer many options for you to create.
2. **Gather key objects.** Rummage through the materials you could possibly use for this. Grab the stuff that feels right or makes you laugh. Imagine the big parts of your machine and how they might fit together. No need to think much, just start attaching things and see what happens. If you're missing something, take the long way home to discover just what you need along the way.
3. **Keep it moving.** Add pieces and parts to complete your narrative. Will people know which lever to pull or button to push? When there is an action, what is the reaction? Moving parts and spring-loaded levers are always intriguing. You might need a secret hatch or a way to attach it to your hat. How will your machine fulfill its mission? It need not actually work, but you may want it to look like it does. You're making a sculpture of an idea, not a realistic prototype.
4. **Final touches.** Have you solved the problem? It's fine if you created a new problem along the way. Hopefully you have an answer to something. Test it out on a neighbor. Does your machine need anything? Certainly, it deserves a name; perhaps some instructions would help. Give it a hook, base, or a pedestal so you can exhibit it. Thanks for bringing this thing into the world.

Share your story

Tell people your machine's name and explain how it works. Let the world know why such a thing is needed and what it means for you.

Reflect on how this creativity came to life. What made this possible? And what will become possible for your future creative endeavors? Were there bad parts that became good parts?

An imaginary machine that does what only someone like you might need